

# Indian Rose Annual - IRA 2012

## Mystery Roses of India

Girija and M.S. (Viru) Viraraghavan

If you look at the world map it is quite clear that India is well placed to have received a flood of roses from the two great centers of wild and historical roses – China, and Persia (now Iran) and the Middle East. This, together with the fact that India's social order was severely disrupted by 700 years of foreign rule makes it rather appropriate to describe the country as, with apologies to Fitzgerald and Omar Khayyam, "a battered caravanserai whose alternate portals are east and west".

It is quite fascinating to chronicle how roses reached India in so many ways but sheer numbers would have made it impossible to do justice to the subject but for the fact that most of India having an unfavorable climate for roses, resulted in rapid extinction of many of the new rose introductions arriving from more favored climes.

The chief source of roses into India was of course the fabled 'Silk Route', starting in the east from Japan and China through central Asia and entering India through the north Himalayan passes, but mainly from the western passes, particularly the Khyber Pass, near Peshawar in modern Pakistan. The Khyber Pass entry was again significant for the influx of roses from Persia. Apart from this romantic land route, there had been extensive sea trade between China, South East Asia, and the Arab countries, and India. The Chinese love for roses extended to their sailors carrying pot roses in their galleons as nostalgic reminders of home, and Indian ports, for e.g. Calicut on the west coast, would certainly have received many such plants.

One other factor that must be emphasized is the Indian tradition of not recording history, but passing on knowledge and information by word of mouth, from generation to generation - an adequate system perhaps in times of peace but hardly capable of withstanding alien rule. So it is no surprise that we have to depend largely on the travelogues of foreigners

visiting India for details of roses which existed in the past, and which have now become 'mystery roses' without trace. Fortunately for chroniclers of Indian rose history, there are a few Indian references.

Before taking up these references we cannot resist mentioning a legend where the Hindu gods, Brahma the Creator, and Vishnu the Protector, had a debate whether the lotus or the rose was the most beautiful of flowers – and of course the rose won!

An interesting reference to roses is the mention in the 'Kama Sutra', the ancient treatise on the art of love, dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, C.E. Oddly enough, amidst a wealth of rather explicit advice, there is a chapter entitled 'Duties of a Virtuous Wife' and one of these is to maintain a garden with many fragrant flowers, including roses. Not a clue on what roses could have been in existence then.

An authentic Indian record of roses is the stone tablet now lodged in Sintra, Portugal which has inscribed on it an edict of a chieftain, Sarangadeva, of a part of Gujarat, dating to early 13<sup>th</sup> century. This tablet speaks of an allotment of land to the gardener's guild, on the condition that the guild supplied the temple of Somnath 200 white roses and 2000 oleanders every day. Clearly, this mystery white rose must have been of the continuous flowering kind if the conditions of the edict were to be met. But the significant point is that such a white rose could only be of Chinese origin, pointing to the arrival of continuous flowering roses to India earlier than the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Again in Gujarat, around the same period, the Central Asian traveler and historian, Rashiduddin, records that the people of the region 'were very happy, and grew over 60 kinds of roses'.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century there was great king, Krishna Deva Raya, in peninsular India, who ruled over the Vijayanagar Empire. The Portuguese traveler, Domingo Paes talks of the king being received with white roses every morning during the nine day Dasera Festival held in the month of October. This again was obviously a continuous flowering white rose, capable of flowering in October. A little later in 1503 C.E., the Italian traveler, Ludovico Varthema, refers to roses in 'white, pink, red and yellow' being grown by the natives of the port city of Calicut (northern part of Kerala

State, on the western coast ). Efforts to trace these roses have so far been in vain. Could it be that these were roses brought by the Chinese in their ships as mentioned earlier?

The Mughal emperors of India who ruled over most of the country during the period 1500 C.E. to late 1700 were great flower enthusiasts and used their Central Asian and Afghan connections to import the musk rose as well as a form of *R. damascena* still grown in North India for extraction of rose attar. This rose is probably *R. damascena bifera*.

In more recent times, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Tipu Sultan, a great king of Mysore (southern India) was a lover of roses, especially red roses. It is believed that his gardens called 'Lal Bagh' (Red Garden), both in his capital, Srirangapatna, and in nearby Bangalore, were so called because of the red roses so extensively planted in them. No prizes for guessing that we do not know what this red rose was!!

After taking control of the country from the declining Mughal Empire, the British were also instrumental in introducing many roses. Here, apart from a love of gardening, the strategic location of Calcutta, the capital of the East India Company and later of the British Indian Empire, (till they moved to New Delhi, the present capital), was very useful. Roses brought out from China by the likes of Robert Fortune and others, necessarily had to be rested and recovered before the long sea journey again to England, via the Cape.

The four Stud Chinas, among many others, must have passed through like this. But there is a curious observation in the book 'The Book of Roses - A Rose Fancier's Manual' by Mrs. Gore, 1847, (alleged to be an English replica of Pierre Boitard's 'Manual Complet de l'amateur des roses') where she describes the tigers and crocodiles of Bengal lurking under giant red rose bushes of *Rosa semperflorens* alias 'Slater's Crimson China'. 'Slater's Crimson China' could probably have reached India by then, but looking at what is now grown as this rose in Calcutta, one wonders whether such a moderate growing plant could camouflage a tiger or a crocodile.

This use of Calcutta (which is in the state called 'Bengal') in this import of roses, perhaps explains why so many original Chinese roses of that period have the prefix 'Bengal' attached.

One of the great British gardeners in India was the Rev. Firminger, who lived in Calcutta in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He refers to a *R. lyelli*, a form of *R. clinophylla*, which is the rose species found in the tropical parts of India. This form is a hybrid with beautiful double blush colored flowers. Firminger says this is common in the gardens of 'Upper India' – what is at present the state of Uttar Pradesh. Not a trace can be found of this rose, which, from a personal point of view is most aggravating as it could be potentially of great value in our work with *R. clinophylla*.

As can be seen the roses we have listed so far are those mentioned in various historical records but which have not yet been located in present day India. But there are also a fair number currently grown in various areas which have not been identified.

One of the most interesting of these roses is the dark pink to rose-red Bourbon / Hybrid Perpetual type of rose called "Kakinada Red" after the port town on the eastern peninsular coast. This bears semi-double to double flowers, nicely scented - more a fruity fragrance than the damask scent, much used in making garlands - on a straggly bush with blue green foliage and not many prickles. Gregg Lowery of Vintage Roses, California, had tentatively concluded, based on our discussions with him, and photographs sent by us, that this rose was probably identical with 'Maggie' of the U.S.A., and 'Pacific' of Bermuda. Erich Unmuth of Austria, the authority on the roses of the European hybridizer Rudolf Geschwind, felt that all these roses could be identical with 'Julius Fabianics de Misefa' (1902). Earlier 'Maggie' had been tentatively identified as Geschwind's 'Eugene E. Marlitt' in the USA. Recent DNA analysis done by Dr Anne Bruneau of the University of Montreal, Institute of Biology, has led to the conclusion that "Kakinada Red", 'Maggie', 'Pacific' and 'Julius Fabianics de Misefa' have identical sequences for all 3 markers tested. Therefore, this group also appears to share at least a partial genetic origin". The matter rests there, as apparently more detailed analysis is required. If indeed "Kakinada Red" is 'Misefa', there is still the question on how the rose reached India so early. But it is interesting to note that another Geschwind rose, 'Gruss an Teplitz' has been widely grown in northern India for a century or so.

Our next mystery rose is a pink China which can reach 6-7 feet in height in favorable conditions. This rose, nicknamed "Telengana Pink" by us, has

perfect medium sized H.T. form at bud stage, but opens to old rose form, and the flowers which are produced continuously, are nicely complemented by the shining typical China rose foliage. We first encountered this rose in the Telengana region of the Deccan Plateau, near the city of Hyderabad - the Deccan plateau is the central part of southern peninsular India, which is better suited for growing roses than the coast, as it lies at 2000 + feet elevation above sea level. Despite earnest efforts to identify this rose, in consultation with the Californian rose guru, Fred Boutin, we could not come up with any clear answers. The reader can best imagine what this rose looks like by thinking of a large sized version of 'Mme. Cecile Brunner'. In fact we thought this was a form of the latter till we had a chance to compare it with 'Mme Cecile Brunner' and her close relatives (sports?), 'Bloomfield Abundance' and 'Spray Cecile Brunner'. We cannot resist speculating that this rose may have reached India straight from China in ancient times.

Another mystery rose, this time a climber, is fairly common in our area of the Palni Hills, an eastern offshoot of the main Western Ghats mountain range of peninsular western India. This rose is a vigorous climber with foliage close to the China type, bearing large single flowers of delicate shades of pink with paler centers. It flowers but once in the year, and our friend Helga Brichet, who gardens in Santa Maria, in Perugia, Italy, says it does very nicely with her. It has not been possible to identify this variety so far. We call it "Holiday Home Rose" as we first noticed it growing at the entrance of a hotel of that name.

Tea roses thrive in the moderate climate regions of India, but almost all remain unidentified. As a sampler we will deal with three of these. Our first Tea rose is what is called by Indian nurserymen as "Seven Days Rose", as it is reputed to flower every seven days. While this may be hyperbole, the rose is certainly a very beautiful Tea of light yellow color bearing very full flowers - exquisite H.T. form at bud stage and opening slowly to typical muddled form. The pale yellow color seems to intensify with age. We wonder whether this is 'Alexander Hill Gray', which was grown in South India, especially in what used to be called the 'garden city' of Bangalore, which now, from the gardening point of view, is a city destroyed by the I.T. revolution. For a rose of this color it is indeed surprising that we got our

original plant from the city of Madurai, (further south to Bangalore) which has one of the hottest and driest climates of southern India.

Another Madurai find is a very vigorous but spreading rose, with very large flowers, full of petals, in dark pink. The blooms which quite often hang their heads, open to lovely old rose form and are borne on a very healthy bush. Typical Tea fragrance. The unvarying pink color seems to distinguish this from the widely grown 'Mrs B.R.Cant' which has two shades of pink. We have code-named this "Madurai Tea".

The third of our mystery Teas was collected in a friend's garden on the main Western Ghat Mountains, at about 3000 feet altitude at a location which gets the full fury of the monsoon rains, nearly 200 inches in a year. This is the heart of the romantic spice growing area, where cardamom and pepper flourish. This rose, which we call "Renu's Apricot Tea" (Renu is our friend) has very full flowers, globular at bud stage opening to delightful old rose form when weather conditions are right. If the weather is wet, the buds tend to rot. There is again a nice Tea scent. It has proved a very fertile parent in our efforts to create new forms of Tea roses.

The mystery roses we have described are representative of what is available in South India but there are numerous other parts of the country which are full of unidentified old roses - but information on them is very difficult to find. Some of these, from the desert state of Rajasthan, in India's north west, have been described by the eminent Italian rose collector and gardener, Vittorio Ducrot. His garden in Corbara, north of Rome, contains among others, a large number of roses found by him from various parts of Asia - Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Burma, Laos and China.

Ducrot lists the following:

1. The "Indian Pink Temple rose". A tall plant with dark foliage producing medium to small double roses with a wonderful scent, picturesquely described as used in the 'rain of petals in the chamber of newly weds'.
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3. The “Indian Anand rose” growing in the ‘Anand Nursery’ in Jaipur, Rajasthan, described as bearing ball like double lilac pink flowers produced about four times in a year, with an excellent scent.
4. The “Luni Castle rose” found in Fort Chanwa near Luni, a wide growing shrub with very dark pink almost crimson colored roses with an excellent scent.
5. The “Karauli rose” in the garden of the Maharaja of Karauli from north east Rajasthan, with ball shaped cupped double flowers and good perfume.

All these and more ‘found’ roses are described in Ducrot’s book, ‘A Garden for Roses’ (2001).

The reader can understand that there should be many more mystery roses lurking in many places in India, particularly the lower ranges of the Himalayas, and in Bengal, waiting to be found and identified by enthusiasts, who are, sadly, not visible in present times.

Apart from the location and identification of ‘mystery roses’ the heritage rose movement requires that we create new forms of the old roses – to produce roses which combine the time-tested virtues of the old with new characteristics. David Austin has pioneered this kind of work, but his roses, having been bred for the British climate, are not suited for the world’s warmer rose growing areas, which require new forms of Teas, Chinas and Noisettes, which are well adapted. To this end work has been done with *R. clinophylla*, (a close relative of *R. bracteata*), which is perhaps the world’s only tropical rose species, and the with the superior form of *R. gigantea*, found in India’s North-East. Among the new arrivals are Tea roses of the type of ‘Aussie Sixer’ and ‘Faith Whittlesey’, as well as a series of yet unreleased dwarf Tea roses (which we are calling ‘Patio Teas’) suited for container culture. Work has also progressed with *R. gigantea* to yield new climbers and shrubs adapted to warmth.

The nearness to rose species in these introductions should hopefully contribute to better adaptability and ease of culture.

This article was originally published in the 2011 book *Mystery Roses Around the World*, and is reprinted here with the permission of the Heritage Rose Foundation of USA.

## Copies of the original

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**"Telengana Pink"**



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Ganges Nymph - a *R. clinophylla* hybrid



"Virorange" unnamed seedling (Lover's meeting x Priyatama)

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